

**Sermon for Sunday, July 29, 2012**  
**Dr. Dan Doriani**  
**Caring for Each Other**  
**Acts 20, Nahum 1:7, 1 Peter 5:7**

*Nah. 1:7 The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him.*

*1Pet. 5:7 Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*

In northern Sudan, a road runs from Sudan's pyramids in Nubia to the provincial center Atbara. Sometimes the road is paved, sometimes it's dirt and sand. Paul Theroux and his guide were driving along when they saw torn rubber all over the road. The driver left the road and drove a short distance into the desert. He soon spied a car that had skidded to a stop after a blown tire. With temperatures well at 110°, tires don't go flat, they explode. Three men stood by a car that had no spare and quickly hopped into their rescuing truck. The driver drove them more than an hour out of his way. The men were grateful but not especially so. It was normal courtesy, like the rule of the sea that requires one ship to help another, no matter how inconvenient. The driver explained, "They had a problem... We help."<sup>1</sup>

**God cares for us (Nahum 1:7, 1 Peter 5:7)**

Normal human compassion leads us to care for other people in times of need. Evolutionists say we evolved as a social species, hunting, gathering and caring for our young in groups. Scripture says we care for each other because God created us in his image. He is compassionate, so we have the capacity to feel compassion and to act. That's why we care for one another.

The Lord says he is "the compassionate and gracious God... abounding in love and faithfulness" (Exod 34:6). Psalm 103 says "Praise the Lord because he forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases... redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion... As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust" (103:3-4, 13-14).

God's compassion, his capacity to care for us, is an emotion. The beauty of God's emotions is this: they lead him to *act*. We can feel empathy or compassion and do nothing. God's compassion leads him to act. His compassion led him to make covenants and to send Jesus. So because God cares for – as a feeling – he cares for us – in action.

The prophet Nahum says "The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him." He promised to act to defeat Israel's terrible foe, the violent people of Ninevah (Nah. 1:7-8).

Peter says, "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, so that, at the proper time, he may exalt you" (5:6). The phrase, "the mighty hand of God" is from the exodus. There God's mighty hand defeated the power of Pharaoh and Israel escaped to freedom (Exod. 13:9, Deut. 3:24, 7:19). At the transfiguration, Moses and Elijah call the work of Jesus a second Exodus. Jesus' death is "the exodus he was [soon] to accomplish in Jerusalem" (Luke 9:31). Since Jesus accomplished a new exodus, we enjoy

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Theroux, *Dark Star Safari*, NY Houghton Mifflin, 2003, 83-85.

God's power and compassion as Israel did. That's what Peter means when he says God has a "mighty hand:" he cares for us with his hand (5:6-7).

Peter continues, "Cast all our anxiety on him, because he cares for you" (5:7). Notice that *anxiety* is singular. We normally think of *anxieties*, plural. We worry about work, health, relationships, and a too-dense schedule. Problems roll in like waves then congeal into one mass of *anxiety*.

If we pay attention, we sense the big **Anxiety** in our friends, and our friends see it in us. We can weather modest problems, arriving one by one, but when a cluster arrives, with a big one in the tail, we feel it.

Peter commands us to take our anxiety and cast it or toss it onto God. In Luke 19:35 the disciples *cast* [same word] their cloaks onto a donkey so Jesus could ride it. As we throw a bag of gym clothes into our car or toss trash into a can, so we can toss our anxiety onto God. He is mighty and he will exalt us at his right time, Peter says, because *our* cares are *his*.

Still, to cast our anxiety on him, we must understand it. Jesus says we should not be anxious: "Don't worry about your life..." *Pagans* constantly worry, asking what they will eat, drink, or wear. If we trust God, we don't exhaust ourselves chasing these things, for we know our Father feeds and clothes us (Matt. 6:25-32).

So we should not *indulge* our worries. Yet Paul admits that he has *anxiety* (same word). He lists his troubles as an apostle: the beatings and jails, the hunger, thirst, cold and shipwreck. He concludes, "And apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my *anxiety* for all the churches" (2 Cor. 11:28). So Paul has anxiety. He sees anxiety as a *problem* but not a *sin*.

Conclusion: Anxiety is *normal* in some circumstances. It's possible to be anxious and yet not sin. How? First, we confess it. We tell God and we tell the right friends. Yes, want to be careful. We don't want to tell everyone. But we should tell *someone*, so that they pray for us and care for us.

Second, we don't panic. We don't dash around in a panic like pagans or atheists. We know God cares for us. That slows us down. We don't try to solve our problems autonomously.

Suppose a woman is anxious because – name a problem. She should ask God for help. She should also do what she can to solve the problem, enlisting friends or professionals as appropriate. She can act and pray, "Lord, I've done what I can. I leave the results to you (Psa. 90:17). The fear of poverty and loneliness weighs me down, and I give them to you."

Literally, Peter says, "Humble yourselves under God's mighty hand... casting all your anxiety on him. That is, one way we humble ourselves before God is by giving our cares to him. And we give our cares to him because we trust his mighty hand and believe he cares for us (1 Pet. 5: 6-7).

Big ideas: Because God cares for us *with his heart*, he cares for us *with his actions*. Because he cares for us, he cares for us. He puts us in families, gives us friends. He created the church, where believers care for each other. He cares for us through the care we *have* for each other and through the care we *give* each other.

## **We care for each other (Acts 20)**

We can care for each other three ways: First, by fulfilling our callings and duties; second, by sharing burdens and sorrows; third, by sharing our emotions and affection. Easy to say, harder to do.

### **Fulfilling our callings**

In 2001, Paul Theroux traveled by overland by boat, car, truck, canoe and bus, from Cairo to Johannesburg. That's 5,000 miles if you could travel in a straight line, which you can't. Borders were closed or almost closed and roads shown on the map were often more theoretical than real.

Theroux got stuck more than once, but he knew several languages and knew how to get around – he had spent time as an aid worker in Africa. People helped each other – almost all the time. The exception was the foreign aid workers, the Europeans and Americans blasting around in large air-conditioned Land Cruisers. He didn't like to ask their help, and when he did, they rarely gave it - Can I catch a ride? "This isn't a taxi service." Can I sleep on your floor tonight? "We aren't running a hotel. And besides we don't have any room." They had plenty of room. They were too busy saving the world to help one man in need. But if they refused to help the person in front of them, how could they save the world?

Maybe aid work was a job or an adventure or a point on their resume. Maybe they were weary, maybe they had been burned. Still... We help each other when it's a calling, not just a job. Acts 20 shows Paul lived that way. He cared for God's people by fulfilling his task. He cared for them by doing what God called him to do. Then as he cared for them they cared for him.

To some extent, affection is a gift. We like someone because we connect as humans. But affection also grows when we do things for each other. It can grow most when we offer help according to our calling. We care for our doctor if he or she takes care of us when we are sick. The same holds for neighbors, work partners, hair cutters. Emotions grow from actions.

In Acts 20, Paul was traveling to Jerusalem by boat. God had warned him of trouble there so he decided to send a messenger to summon the elders of Ephesus to visit with him one last time. They had to travel about 100 miles on foot. They came because they had strong bonds from three years working with Paul. For three years, Paul spoke to all comers, every afternoon. So he fulfilled his duty as an apostle. He preached the gospel and led people to maturity one by one. This was an example for those elders and for us. He said, "You know how I lived the whole time I was with you I served the Lord with great humility and with tears." Paul doesn't mean he burst into tears as he spoke. But he wept as he prayed for them. He cared and they knew it. He preached "anything [any truth] that would be helpful to you" and did so "publicly and from house to house" (20:18-20).

He suffered humiliations and plots. He lectured in public and reasoned in private. He always tried to persuade but never changed his message to please anyone. He knew his purpose – to call everyone "to turn to God in repentance and have faith in... Jesus" (20:21).

He knew greater trials were coming, even prison, death: "In every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me" (20:23). He knows he will never see them again and declares he has fulfilled his duty. "However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me — the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace. Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again.

Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God” (20:24-27).

They had seen this with their own eyes. As Paul's ministry became more fruitful it disrupted familiar religions and festivals. An anti-Christian riot broke out one day. Thousands of people shouted out their affection for the main local deity in Ephesus, Artemis. Paul saw the mob as an audience for the gospel. He wanted to enter the amphitheater where the crowd had gathered. His friends feared for his safety and refused to let him. But they loved him for trying. So they came to see him and to hear his final counsel: “Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold.... You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs... In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'” (20:32-35).

Paul said his life was meaningless unless he testified to God's grace. That's why he risked his life. When he finished, “He knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again” (20:36-38).

I often think of this passage as I say good-bye to two pastors and a ministry leader, as they leave to pursue doctorates. I'm glad for them, because they will do the work and I expect great things from them. But I'm very sad, grieving. Why? Well, I like them. They are bright and funny, bold and real. But I also grieve because they were faithful to their calling. They've got talent, they work hard, and I respect that.

That holds for all of us. We care for each other *emotionally* because we care for each other *in deeds, in actions*. Children love their mothers with pure affection, but children also love their mothers because "She takes care of me." Children love mom's warmth; they also love food, clothes, a listening ear.

In John 10, Jesus compares true and false shepherds. When the hired hand sees a wolf coming, he doesn't protect the sheep, he runs away, saves himself because the sheep aren't his. "He flees... because he cares nothing for the sheep." Jesus is the good shepherd. He cares for the sheep and lays down his life for them – for us. That's one reason why we love Jesus.

### **By sharing burdens, joys, and sorrows in hard tasks**

We also care for each other by sharing our burdens - our joys and sorrows. In Ecclesiastes 3:4, Solomon says "There is a time to weep and a time to laugh." Notice that he puts weeping first. For many of us, weeping comes first. We need to stand with friends, family, neighbors when the weeping comes.

Jesus says, "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Luke 6:21, Matt. 5:4). Ultimately, we know God will comfort us and make us laugh again.

God shares our burdens and we need to share each other's burdens. Paul said, "If one suffers, all suffer. But if one is honored, all rejoice" (1 Cor 12:26). We care for each, in part, by celebrating together. There is a time to laugh, to rejoice with those who rejoice (Ecc. 3:4, Rom. 12:15b). When someone finally has a baby, finds a job or finishes a project (in Luke 1:58 neighbors rejoiced with Elizabeth when she gave birth.)

This week at least two people in our church rejoiced in tragedy. People they love were dying, but dying well. Full of faith, in peace. Jesus tells his disciples, "Rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20). That makes sense, but it's hard to do that by ourselves. We need people around us.

### **By sharing our emotions and affection**

We care for each other by sharing our life, our emotions and situations. One of the great questions of life: When should we carry our burdens ourselves? When should we seek help? In short span in Galatians 6, Paul says both: "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2). Three verses later, "Each one should carry his own load" (6:5).

He doesn't tell us where the line is – the Bible rarely does – but there is a moment when *our* load, our responsibility, becomes too heavy and we need help, more hands to carry the load.

In this church we care for each other, in ways that should be better known. I'll mention a couple of them. The first few weeks after the birth of a new baby are demanding. But if someone in our community has a baby and the parents let us know, volunteers will bring a number of meals to them for the first few weeks.

If you are facing a serious problem and it seems too much for you to bear, contact the elders and we will gather a team to help you if you wish. The team will probably have one elder because God especially calls elders to care for the church. It will also have godly men and women, selected according to your needs.

If you face a major problem, there are elders and godly women waiting to pray with you after every worship service in the prayer room. For serious cases, we follow James 5. If you call, if you ask, "the elders of the church will pray" over the sick man, woman or child "and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord." We practice this and have seen powerful answers to prayer. A young couple asked for prayer for their child and they will tell their story here in a couple weeks. We'll pray for you too, today or when you wish.

As I studied caring for each other, I looked at the emotional side of care, affection, and saw again that physical affection is important. Five times the New Testament commands believers to greet with a kiss (Rom 16:16, 1 Cor. 16:20, 2 Cor. 13:12, 1 Thes. 5:26, 1 Pet. 5:14). To be clear, this was cheek to cheek, not man to woman, not on the lips. The cheek kiss was common when friends or family reunited. Not everyone did it. The kiss demonstrated friendship, kinship, affection. The Ephesian elders kissed Paul when they saw him for the last time (Acts 20:37). In Jesus' parable, the father kisses the prodigal son (Luke 15:20). But a Pharisee proves he has no love for Jesus when he doesn't greet him with a kiss (7:45). Since we belong to God's family, we can seal our ties with "a kiss of love."

We may not kiss, but we have to find ways that fit our culture so it feels good, to show affection – a big handshake or a hug. Whatever we do, it must be real. We need real affection so the sign carries weight. We need to take time to form relationships. Then the touch seals our unity and says we belong to God's family.

## Conclusion

You heard about the life guard who was fired for leaving his post to save a man who was drowning in an unprotected area, outside his assigned area. He called it in to his supervisor. The supervisor said, "Don't go. That's an unprotected area. It's not your responsibility." But he had to go.

There is something in us that makes us want to care for others. We lose our way sometimes. We're hardened by endless requests. Or we take offense and don't want to help any more because he did *that* to me and...

God cares for us emotionally and he cares for us in action. Above all, Jesus cared for us. He can restore the desire to care that is in you. Looking to Christ, his care for us, we have the highest motive to care for others. How? Fulfill your calling. Share your feelings. Love each other as Jesus has loved you.